DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 443 549 PS 028 709

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TITLE	Principals and Play: A Qualitative Study of Administrator Beliefs about the Place of Play in K-2 Programs.
PUB DATE	2000-04-00
NOTE	37p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, April 24-28, 2000).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Administrator Attitudes; *Administrator Qualifications; Administrator Responsibility; Beliefs; Developmentally Appropriate Practices; Educational Practices; Educational Quality; Knowledge Level; *Play; Primary Education; *Principals; Qualitative Research

ABSTRACT

Noting that the quality of early childhood education (ECE) programs offered in public schools is directly affected by the understanding of and value placed on such a program by the building principal, this qualitative study examined principals' understanding and beliefs about children's play and its place in K-2 early childhood programs. Phase 1 of the study involved gathering group survey data on general beliefs about ECE. Findings from Phase 1 suggested that the administrators scored high on the developmentally appropriate practice scale (DAP) and low on the traditional practices (TRAD) scale. Phase 2 involved the selection of four participants representing four belief types: (1) low DAP, high TRAD beliefs; (2) high DAP, low TRAD; (3) high DAP, high TRAD; and (4) low DAP, low TRAD. Individual hour-long interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. The overriding theme emerging from the transcripts was that the principals overestimated their level of expertise about children's play and displayed unwarranted confidence in their ability to deal with issues regarding its role in ECE. Principals lacked relevant preparation and experience, lacked specific knowledge about play, and lacked understanding about its curricular role. (Contains 65 references.) (KB)

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Principals and play: A qualitative study of administrator beliefs about the place of play in K-2 programs.

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Paper
Presented at the
Annual Conference of the
American Educational Research Association
New Orleans, LA
April 24-28, 2000

PS 028709

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INTRODUCTION

The quality of any early childhood program offered in a public school is directly affected by the understanding of and value placed on such a program by the building principal. The administrator is the one who sets the general tone for the importance of early childhood education in that setting, who is responsible for establishing an instructional climate that is conducive to developmentally appropriate early education, and who most often controls the budget and schedule that allow a program to be delivered effectively. Therefore, it is important to ask just what building principals understand about early childhood education and what value is placed on appropriate programs for young children in their buildings.

This study focused on principals' understanding and beliefs about children's play since play is so central to conceptualizations of developmentally appropriate practice and to definitions of quality in early childhood education (Bergen, 1988; Hughes, 1999; Van Hoorn, Nourot, Scales, & Alward, 1999). Both the National Association for the Education of Young Children (Bredekamp, 1987; Bredekamp & Copple,1997) and the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP,1990) have published explicit position statements on what appropriate programs for young children should look like. And, both statements place special emphasis on children's play as an essential part of effective early childhood environments. In particular, in discussing the notion of individual appropriateness, the NAEYC guidelines for appropriate practice in early childhood programs (Bredekamp, 1987) state, "Children's play is a primary vehicle for and indicator of their mental growth.... Therefore, child-initiated, child-directed, teacher-supported play is an essential component of developmentally appropriate practice" (p.3). And further, in stressing that play is not just something for the youngest children, these guidelines assert that "...the child's active participation in self-directed

play with concrete, real-life experiences continues to be a key to motivating meaningful learning in kindergarten and the primary grades" (p. 4). In a similar vein, the NAESP (1990) standards for quality programs for young children, in discussing several fundamental principles for quality programs, maintain that "children in preschool through primary grades should be engaged in active --- rather than passive --- learning activities ..." and that "spontaneous play, either alone or with other children, is a natural way for young children to learn to deal with one another and to understand their environment; play should be valued and included in the program plan" (p. 4). The specific beliefs that elementary building principals endorse send distinct messages to teachers, parents, and children about the focus and mission of the school, how community is defined there, and what the instructional expectations are. These are all fundamental administrative functions that help to define the meaning and value placed on young children's play and its place in the educational practices of their schools.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of the present study was to describe the understanding of play by elementary principals who have been part of a school district that has placed a strong emphasis on early childhood education in its programs and philosophy. The perspectives on play held by these administrators were seen as indirect indicators of their perspectives on the larger issues of developmentally appropriate practices and early childhood education overall.

Therefore, given the importance of play in early childhood education and the central position that elementary principals have in regard to the nature of the early childhood programs in their buildings, the following questions guided the present investigation:

1. What do elementary principals in this district understand about young children's play?
2. What perspectives and beliefs do these elementary principals hold about the place of young children's play in K-2 early childhood programs?

METHOD

Participant Selection

The principals interviewed were selected through a two-phase process. The initial phase involved the gathering of group quantitative survey data on beliefs about early childhood education, in general. The second phase involved the purposeful selection of four participants from the larger group of 10, based on the results from the beliefs survey.

Phase I: Initial Quantitative Data Gathering

Each of the administrators responsible for one of the district's 10 elementary schools was invited to participate in the study. All agreed to participate and were administered the Primary Teacher Questionnaire (PTQ) (Smith, 1993), a 42-item teacher beliefs scale based on the guidelines for developmentally appropriate practice published by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (Bredekamp, 1987). While the full guidelines address practice with children from birth through age eight, the PTQ reflects only the portion of the guidelines relevant to school-age children. The PTQ consists of 2 subscales, one of 18 items assessing endorsement of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP Scale) and the other of 24 items assessing endorsement of more traditional practice (TRAD Scale). Respondents indicate their level of endorsement of each of the 42 items using a 4-point Likert-type scale. The score reported for each of the scales is the sum of responses to its items. For the DAP Scale scores can range between 18 and 72, and for the TRAD Scale between 24 and 96. In a study reporting the development of the PTQ (Smith, 1993), the coefficient alpha reliability of the DAP and TRAD scales was .80 and .86, respectively. The PTQ has been shown to discriminate well, on the basis of beliefs about developmentally appropriate practice, among teachers (Smith, 1993; Ketner, Smith, & Parnell, 1996) and teacher candidates (McMullen, 1997; Smith, 1997).

With the present sample of 10 principals, however, while the PTQ did discriminate, it did

so less satisfactorily. The mean on the DAP scale was 61 (SD = 6.02) , with a sample range of 53-70, while the mean on the TRAD scale was 37.9 (SD = 7.25), with a sample range of 25-49. These scores are high on the DAP scale and low on the TRAD scale. Based solely on these means and ranges, one might conclude that, as a whole, this group of administrators generally endorsed a child-centered and developmentally-based approach to the education of K-2 children, while at the same time rejecting a traditional, teacher-centered approach. Did these initial responses reflect true beliefs formed by prior training and experience or did they represent "politically correct" responses by a group of perceptive and cautious administrators whose school district had for some time been overtly championing various aspects of early childhood education? The qualitative nature of the remainder this study provided some insight on this question.

Phase II: Rationale and Selection of a Sample for Qualitative Study.

The qualitative investigation planned as a follow-up to this initial quantitative profile of principals' beliefs offered the opportunity to both elaborate on the details of administrator beliefs and provide a means to differentiate among different constellations of beliefs. Not only do qualitative samples tend to be small and purposeful, rather than random and representative, but "samples in qualitative studies are usually not wholly prespecified, but can evolve once fieldwork begins" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 27). This was the case in the present study.

Belief constellations. Based on the quantitative results from the PTQ, a combination of critical case and dimensional sampling was used (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A sample median break was used to divide the 10 principals into two groups, labeled high (at or above the median) and low (below the median), on each of the two scales (DAP & TRAD) from the PTQ. Next, each individual was cross-classified into one of four belief constellations: high-DAP/ high-TRAD; high-DAP/ low-TRAD; low-DAP/ high-TRAD; and low-DAP/ low-TRAD. After the

scores were cross categorized, the individual whose PTQ scores best represented each belief constellation was selected to be interviewed, for a total of 4 interviewees.

The four beliefs constellation can be briefly delineated. A person holding the low-DAP/ high-TRAD belief constellation endorses a teacher-centered over a child-centered educational environment. Conversely, someone with the high-DAP/ low-TRAD constellation endorses a child-centered over a teacher-centered environment. These two belief constellations represent clearly differentiated belief clusters. However, with the remaining two constellations things are less clearly defined. Both represent a lack of differentiation. Someone adhering to the high-DAP/ high-TRAD constellation endorses various beliefs about education that in many aspects are incompatible one with another (Smith, 1990), while the person with the low-DAP/ low-TRAD belief constellation has not endorsed any clearly differentiated belief cluster.

Educational implications of belief constellations. As suggested before, the beliefs that the elementary building principal holds convey messages to teachers, parents, and children about what is valued in that school and what the instructional expectations and norms are. And these messages, in turn, determine the value placed on children's play in the setting. The four constellations described above represent discreet clusters of beliefs about developmentally appropriate practice and traditional classroom practice in settings with young children. It is reasonable to expect that the organizational and instructional climates for early childhood education that a principal fosters in a building may be closely related to his or her belief structure about what constitutes appropriate and acceptable educational experiences for young children (Haupt & Ostland, 1997; May, 1992; Spidell-Rusher, McGrevin, & Lambiotte, 1992). Thus, the relationship between beliefs and administrative practice may be manifest in the principal's efforts to define the overall culture of a school (Peterson & Deal, 1998), create a sense of community and shared values (Royal & Rossi, 1997), and establish a sense of a guiding vision and goals

(McEwan, 1998; Smith & Andrews, 1989). How a principal exercises his or her leadership and managerial functions in regard to each of these areas will directly influence the instructional climate in a building (Culkin, 1997; Deal & Peterson, 1999; McEwan, 1998) and ultimately, the nature of the educational experience that children have in that setting.

Although research has clearly demonstrated that there is no simplistic one-to-one relationship between attitudes and behaviors (Millar & Tesser, 1992; Saks & Krupat, 1988), considerable work has been done on the predictability of behaviors from attitudes and beliefs (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977; Millar & Tesser,1992; Zanna & Fazio, 1982). While the content of expressed beliefs should not be taken to be equivalent to the content of observed behavior, the relationship between beliefs and practice is nevertheless substantial (Pajares, 1992). It is reasonable to expect educators' actual behavior toward children to manifest the beliefs systems and expectations they hold (Eiser, 1983; Harvey & Weary, 1985; Olson, Roese, & Zanna, 1996; Rogers, 1982) since beliefs are filters through which experience is screened for meaning (Goodman, 1988; Nespor, 1987; Zeichner, 1986). It is this perceptual effect that influences the educator's decision-making and practice (Brookhart & Freeman, 1992; Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992). Thus, for the present study, the four belief types delineated above offered the opportunity to examine the meaning of children's play for principals in four settings predicated on different educational assumptions and beliefs.

Procedures

Data Collection

Individual interviews, lasting approximately one hour, were conducted at each principal's school. Audio recordings of the interviews were used to produce verbatim transcriptions of the interviews and the accuracy of the transcriptions was checked against the original tapes.

The interviews were conducted using a semistructured format, defined by Kvale (1996) as

having "... a sequence of themes to be covered, as well as suggested questions. Yet at the same time there is an openness to changes of sequence and forms of questions in order to follow up the answers given and the stories told by the subjects." (p. 124). The themes addressed in the interview questions arose from a review of the literature concerning the nature of play and adult perceptions of it, the role of play as a learning medium in classrooms for young children, and the influence of the principal on the instructional climate of a school. The interview protocol was arranged in four sections. The initial section consisted of questions to gather specific information about the participant's education, training, and experience. There then followed three groups of questions, one set to elicit information about the participant's knowledge about play, a second set to solicit perspectives on the role of play in the classroom, and a third set that focused on whether teacher use of play in the classroom was a consideration in the participant's philosophy of personnel evaluation. Following Merriam (1988), we used several different types of questions in the interview protocol, including background and demographic questions, opinion and values questions, and some that presented hypothetical situations to which the participant was asked to respond.

Data Analysis

The inductive analysis involved an initial general review of all the information, based on reading each transcript, any field notes made during or soon after the interviews, any reflective notes and memos produced about the data, and the production of summaries of individual transcripts (Creswell, 1998). Next, data was reduced via meaning condensation of longer passages and decontextualized via categorization through the development of cluster codes that were used to sort the data (Creswell, 1998; Kvale , 1996). Finally, the data was interpretively recontextualized into emergent patterns and themes not immediately apparent in the text and that allowed for the relating of the emergent findings to the extant research literature.

RESULTS

Examination of the interview transcripts revealed a wide range of understanding of children's play and its role in an effective early childhood program on the part of the principals interviewed. The fundamental and overriding theme that emerged was that as a group, these principals displayed an overestimation of their level of expertise about children's play and an unwarranted confidence in their ability to deal effectively with issues regarding its role in the early childhood classroom. Three specific sub-themes contributed to this overall impression:

1) Lack of relevant preparation and experience;
2) Lack of specific knowledge about play;
3) Lack of understanding of the curricular role of play.

Theme 1: Missing Pieces --- A Lack of Relevant Preparation and Experience

Although each of the principals interviewed for this study readily validated a central role for play in young children's development and education, and spoke relatively highly of their own expertise concerning play, only one of the four, in fact, had received any specific training relevant to early childhood education or understanding children's play during their initial teacher preparation, teaching career, or administrative preparation. Even this one principal, Alice, indicated that it had been difficult to make early childhood education an emphasis, stating:

> ***Alice:*** *I went in [to college] originally to be a kindergarten teacher, so I took several early education classes... [But] then I had a person [teacher]who said, "No, I think you'd be better in 6th grade.*

Later, although Alice initially took a kindergarten job upon entering the classroom upon graduating from college, the bulk of her teaching experience fell in the intermediate grades:

> ***Alice:*** *I taught 4th grade for 7 years... and [after going to another school] I taught there in [grades] four, five and six for 10 years.*

Not until after several years of teaching and administration did Alice have an opportunity to be

involved with programs for young children:

> ***Alice:*** *I became a principal in 198_, and at that same time, was asked to become the principal of our [new] early childhood centers... every year, we opened up another one, and now we have six.*

The other 3 principals interviewed had gone directly into intermediate or upper elementary classrooms and stayed there throughout their teaching careers. In response to a question about grade levels taught Brian answered "...third through sixth grade actually" for all of his 13 years of classroom experience. To the same question, Carl responded that his 21 years of teaching were "primarily in the intermediate grades, four through six. I did do third grade for two years.... but most in grades four through six." To the same question about levels taught Dennis responded, "I taught a combination of fifth and sixth grade, and I taught for, um, five and a half years in the regular classroom."

Had anything in their undergraduate teacher education or later administrative training prepared them to understand young children's play, its role in children's learning, or its place in teaching in the early childhood classroom?

> ***Alice:*** *[My college] happened to be a teacher's college. I have to say that the books they used ... I never really had play; I had child development and I had kindergarten, classes on how to teach kindergarten, and play was important, but not to the degree it would be, hopefully, now.*
>
> ***Q:*** *How much was play as a learning medium dealt with in your training to be an administrator?*
>
> ***Alice:*** *As an administrator? Absolutely none.*

> ***Q:*** *How would you characterize your [undergraduate teacher] preparation?*
>
> ***Carl:*** *Um, we had a lot of methods courses ...the methods courses were probably the ones that were strongest.... there were a lot of things, you know, there was math methods, reading methods, language arts methods. ...In that whole gamut, I mean, it, it dealt a lot with classroom lesson plans, you dealt with bulletin boards ... but very little play.*
>
> ***Q:*** *And when you were prepared as a principal to evaluate and supervise teachers, was play as a learning medium for children dealt with?*
>
> ***Carl:*** *Um...no.*

Q: *When you were trained as a teacher, how much did they emphasize children's play as a learning device?*

Brian: *At that time, it was minimal. I'm....to be quite honest, I...when I said minimal, as I'm saying minimal, I'm trying to think if it was even mentioned or not. I rather doubt it.*

Q: *Now, when you did your training to be a principal and you were trained to evaluate and supervise, again, how much was children's play as a learning medium emphasized or dealt with?*

Brian: *It was even more minimal there, administratively.*

Q: *What do you think the emphasis was on your administrative training?*

Brian: *Policies, procedures, curriculum, and ... um, budgets.*

Q: *And, how would you characterize that [your undergraduate teacher] preparation?*

Dennis: *Um, pretty standard for the time. It was very heavy on the, uh, on the academics, ... a lot of, you know, social studies classes, to teach you to be a social studies teacher ... those kinds of things. Um, I didn't consider it strong at all. I think that it was ... very weak...*

Q: *So, how much then was child's play as a learning medium dealt with?*

Dennis: *I don't remember that it, it was really even dealt with at that stage.*

Q: *Did you have any child development classes, anything like that?*

Dennis: *Well, we had child development classes, but I don't remember it being emphasized in the school setting, until my own in-service training in my current profession ... where I'm at now.*

Q: *O.K. Now, when you were preparing to be a principal and to evaluate and supervise teachers, how much was children's play as a learning device dealt with in those classes?*

Dennis: *You know, unless my memory has failed, I don't remember that it was really talked about at all. Um, a lot of my administrative classes really didn't deal very much with supervision of instruction, unfortunately. It had to do with building plant maintenance, and scheduling, and, um, just more the administrivia kinds of things.*

These four principals worked in a school district that for several years had stressed early childhood education, as evidenced by the development of its early education centers, by being the first school district in its metropolitan area to move from a half-day to a full-day kindergarten program, and by the district's provision of extensive inservice training for its kindergarten and primary teachers on the use of developmentally appropriate practices in the primary grades. Yet

only one of the four principals, Alice, could point to any professional preparation or experience relevant to the range of early childhood education taking place in their buildings. Like Alice, each of the other principals could point to some administrative responsibility for an early childhood program, either through having housed in their buildings one of the early childhood centers that Alice mentioned being in charge of or housing a before- and after-school program in the school. And, all had kindergarten through second-grade early childhood education programs in their buildings. Yet, practically speaking, their level of preparation for responsibility for these programs was minimal. Since there were ample inservice sessions dealing with early education for teaching staff, to what degree did these administrators avail themselves of any of these training opportunities? Dennis and Carl were in the middle in terms of their levels of participation. When asked directly, Dennis indicated consistent involvement:

> ***Q:*** *Did you participate in the early childhood training that the K-3 people went through?*
> ***Dennis:*** *Yes, um hum, you bet.*

Carl, on the other hand indicated a less dedicated level of participation:

> ***Q:*** *Have you, um, participated in any of the early childhood training through the district?*
> ***Carl:*** *No, no, you know, every so often, I'll go to one of the early childhood meetings, but....*

The other two principals represented the extremes. Brian had participated in none of the training sessions. By contrast, Alice, after becoming the administrator in charge of the district's early childhood centers had increasingly assumed a greater role in district-level, local, and even state-level early childhood functions and organizations. As her participation increased, so too did her expertise. Thus, she was soon very involved in the inservice training provided for the district's kindergarten and primary teachers, as organizer, sometimes presenter, but constant participant.

In summary, only one of the four had any specific training relevant to early childhood education or children's play during their initial teacher training or administrative preparation. Moreover, although the district stressed the importance of its ECE program, two of the four had taken part only cursorily or not at all in the ECE inservice training offered by the district to k-2 teachers, while two could point to greater participation. Only one of the four could lay claim to any substantial expertise in early childhood education and children's play. Yet each was in charge of the kindergarten through second-grade regular education classrooms in his or her buildings and had some additional supervisory responsibility for an early childhood program, either a before-and-after-school program or a comprehensive early childhood center offering both a preschool program and child care for preschool and school-aged children . Although responsible for such various ECE programs and personnel, these administrators were generally unprepared for their roles.

Unfortunately, this situation is consistent with research indicating that administrators are generally insufficiently trained regarding early childhood education. Ferratier (1985) found, in a survey of elementary school principals in Illinois, that the typical principal had intermediate or middle school teaching experience and training, rather than primary or preprimary experience. Spidell-Rusher, McGrevin, and Lambiotte (1992) found in their study of elementary administrators in Texas that men were more likely to have secondary teaching experience and women more likely to have elementary experience. And, Butterfield & Johnston (1995) reported that in their study 85% of the female principals in their sample had k-3 teaching experience, but only 9% of the males did. Since the ratio of male to female building-level administrators is approximately 2 to 1 (U.S. Department of Education, 1999), and since so few males have preparation or experience at the primary or preprimary level, it is no stretch to assert that elementary administrators, as a group, are unprepared to deal with the early education that takes

place in their buildings. Clearly, additional training in early childhood education is needed if administrators are to exercise an instructional leadership role in or act as advocates for effective early childhood programs (Charlesworth, Hart, Burts, & DeWolf, 1993; Haupt & Ostland, 1997; Lawler, 1989; McGrevin & Spidell-Rusher, 1992).

Furthermore, more than mere exposure to the relevant concepts of appropriate practice is needed. While Butterfield and Johnston (1995) found that attendance at at least one workshop on early childhood education was related to greater endorsement of the NAESP standards for quality ECE programs, the recommendations of other researchers indicate that this may be misleading. Spidell-Rusher, McGrevin, and Lambiotte (1992) assert that efforts at educational reform in ECE should be especially directed toward those school personnel without prior experience with young children. They go on to say that "... all too often our change strategies are geared to teachers... while we ignore principals...It is often assumed that these persons are knowledgeable about all new curricular issues and trends, ... but this is usually not the case" (p. 294). Schultz (1992) maintains that change toward more developmentally appropriate practice depends on on-going support as much as it does on exposure to the research concerning appropriate practice. Likewise, Sykes (1994) and Wood (1994) stress the necessity for a pervasive climate for change, one that integrates staff development with daily practice and immerses administrators in the child-centered approaches being adopted. And, finally, Mooney (1992) also emphasizes this idea of administrator immersion in the process of personal transformation that she calls "coming to know." Certainly, if teachers in early childhood classrooms are to realize much success in moving the practice of the public school away from its tradition of teacher-centered methods to more developmentally appropriate ones, knowledgeable and supportive administrators are essential. Thus, specific training for elementary principals is a necessity, not a luxury.

Theme II: Ignorance Is Bliss: Lack of Specific Knowledge About Play

Information reflecting the level of the participants' specific knowledge about play was elicited in several ways. First, they were given two hypothetical situations: a presentation to a group about play, and a parent questioning the amount of play in a classroom. They were asked to indicate how prepared they would feel to give such a presentation and how they would respond to the parent. Next, they were asked to reflect aloud on what criteria they might use to decide that children's observed activity was play and that the children themselves would consider it to be play.

Hypothetical situation #1: a presentation about play. The four participants were asked how prepared they felt themselves to be concerning play. Specifically, they were presented with a hypothetical situation:

> "Suppose you were asked by the community club [the local equivalent of a PTO] to present a brief overview of play and its role in the education of young children. Although you may have access to someone else to do this presentation, let's assume that you, in particular, are the presenter. On a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being very unprepared and 10 being highly prepared, how knowledgeable about children's play do you feel you are to handle such a task?"

In response to this question Dennis stated:

> *I'd probably say [I am] about a 6, but before I would make the presentation, I would, um, consult with ... people that I know of in my own building or people in our district that are, um, really up-to-date with that, and I would make myself feel like a 10 before I would make the presentation.*

And, when asked about the sources of his expertise about play, since it had already been established that such background had not been included within the context of either teacher or administrative training, Dennis added,

> *Through the district, and ... it's through the district [via the district early childhood training sessions for teachers]; but also conferences that I have attended ... National Association of Elementary School Principals [conferences] would have study sessions on that.*

To the same question about the hypothetical presentation on play Carl responded:

> *I'd say about a 5 ... probably because I think in that area, I don't have a whole lot of*

....my experience like I said before has been primarily in intermediate [grades]. Yeah, a couple years I was with third grade, we did an awful lot of , um, interaction, cooperative groups, projects, things like that that got kids, you know, getting up out of their seats, involved ... Probably, the knowledge I do have, it's, it's coming from, going in and, you know, talking to our, our kindergarten/first grade teachers, observing their classrooms, and seeing kids involved in play.

Brian's responses were especially interesting for the confidence he showed in his own expertise:

Oh, I would say probably 6.5-7 maybe; probably...a strong 7. I'd feel comfortable doing it. And I rate myself that high, because I have 2 children at home, and I have a 6 year old right now who I watch play ... and, uh...because of my experience, with teaching, and, uh, working with kids in general in my job. How comfortable would I be making a presentation? Uh, I'd be comfortable with it. I'd certainly do some prep, like I would any presentation, but I would, I'd feel fairly comfortable with it.

By contrast, compare the quality and depth of the above responses to how Alice responded to the hypothetical presentation question :

I probably would be ... a 7 or an 8. I can't say I'm a 10, because I'm not an expert in the field, but, um, if I were to talk about play, uh, I would just say that that is, um, children's work, and that, in order for children to, uh, develop appropriately, they need to model what they see ... if you don't play house, you are not going to understand a mother's, a father's role, or a family's role. ... children need to put their hands on things, they need to feel it, they need to live it, and if you don't involve ... as I said, it's their work. If you don't give them the opportunity to do what they can see and to put their hands on things, then you've not developed all parts of the child.

Alice was the only one of the four principals to realistically assess her own level of expertise. Was the difference between her credible self-assessment, compared to the inflated self perceptions of expertise on the part of the male principals, simply a reflection of stereotypic sex-role behavior, of males overrating their competence and females underrating theirs (Ryckman & Peckham, 1987; Sadker & Sadker, 1994)? Perhaps, but she was also the only one to have any specific content about play come to mind as she thought about the hypothetical situation. While she downplayed her own expertise, her knowledge about play came through clearly as she generated in a few sentences more specifics about play than the other three principals did combined. Is this gender difference unusual? In their study of the beliefs of elementary principals in Texas, Spidell-Rusher, McGrevin, and Lambiotte (1992) found that female principals were more likely to endorse child-centered techniques than were male, which included

less acceptance of an academic approach in the classroom and greater support of both physical and expressive activities for young children. , They also found that not only did women have significantly more

elementary experience that men, but also that they had more overall classroom experience before moving into administration that did their male counterparts. Similarly, Butterfield & Johnston (1995) found that, in Tennessee, female principals were more likely than males to agree with the the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP,1990) standards for quality early childhood programs. And, finally, in a study of elementary administrators in Idaho, French, Lambert, Pena, Jensen, & Roberts (1998) found female principals more supportive of developmentally appropriate teaching strategies than were male principals. Thus, it should not be surprising that, in the present study, it was the female principal's comments, rather than those of her male colleagues, that indicated greater support for and knowledge about developmentally appropriate practices for young children, and early childhood education, in general.

Hypothetical situation #2: a complaining parent. In order to further explore what these principals understood about young children's play, a second hypothetical situation was presented:

> "You receive a note from the parent of a primary student who is in a classroom where child-directed activity is the norm. This parent is concerned that her child spends too much time playing at school. How do you respond to this parent?"

Since the hypothetical situation presented this time was in a classroom context, these principals appeared to be more comfortable than they were with the previous situation. Handling parent concerns about the classroom is familiar territory. Their responses were more definite, more concrete, and contained more specific information about play. Carl's response to the situation illustrated this clearly:

> *Well, number one, I would ask, you know, what their concerns are. I mean, I know it's play, but what it is about the play that, that bothers them the most. And, to be honest with you, it probably comes... it probably would be a parent that has a very traditional background, in the sense that ... kids ought to be spending more time*

> *in their seats, paying attention, listening and so on... in that sense, ... I would say, that the general philosophy of our program is to get kids involved. ... and through play, I mean, kids physically develop, they socially develop, um, they learn a give-and-take with each other, they learn a sharing concept. I mean, basically play is their work.*

Dennis's response reflected a similar perspective:

> *Well, I would, I would try to inform them about the whole concept of how ... how play ... that it's not just random where kids come in and they just are able to do anything they want to do all day long. ... and, I would obviously bring the teacher in on that. I could talk to the parent about it, because I feel comfortable enough saying that we encourage play as a way that kids actually learn, but that we structure the choices that kids have, so that it's always safe, and so that it does have some type of a predictable outcome ... or an outcome that, you know, is beneficial for kids. And so that what might appear to the untrained eye as just random play, uh, in fact isn't just random play, with no outcome.*

Brian's response was equally definite:

> *I would encourage you [the parent] to continue to come into school and become familiar with what we do in our programs. It does look like play, and, in fact, I would like to have you come in next Tuesday between 9 and 10; I'll set up with my first grade teacher, and we can sit down and watch what they're doing. They're in an age, especially in the primary years between 5, to 8 and 9, when it should look like play, they should be having fun. ... I am taking the stand, that is the way we do it. ... I would continue to invite them in and educate them.*

Despite their lack of specific background about early childhood education and the role of play in young children's development and learning, when given hypothetical situations that involved sharing with parents about the role of play in the education of young children, all felt reasonably qualified to do so, as well as address any parent concerns about there being too much (or too little) play in their child's k-2 classroom. A close look at the details of their responses, however, revealed that generally these administrators were merely relying on generic strategies for dealing with parent concerns, rather than focusing on the particular issues involving play. In many ways, their approach was simply to stress that since the district's philosophy recognized

the importance of play, parents could expect to find it present in kindergarten and primary classrooms. While they presented some information to the parent about play, it was neither detailed nor abundant. In fact, one got the feeling that these principals had put just about everything that they knew about play into what they said in response to the hypothetical situations. They would have been hard pressed to expand or elaborate beyond this.

Such a situation makes it difficult for an administrator to be an effective advocate for quality programs for young children. Charlesworth, et al. (1993) found that principals without prior background in ECE were less likely to value appropriate educational practices, more likely to endorse inappropriate practices, and more likely to have teachers in their buildings who described themselves as using inappropriate practices. Additionally, Butterfield and Johnston (1995) found that elementary principals generally agreed with the theoretical principles underlying the NAESP standards for quality early childhood programs but substantially disagreed with several of the specific recommendations for practice in those standards. In particular, while the standards recommend large group instruction for no more than one-third of the day, the use of concrete materials over workbooks and worksheets, and the encouragement of child-initiated activity for at least one-third of the day, over half of the principals in their sample did not agree with these practices. Likewise, Hitz and Wright (1988) found that principals supported far less time devoted to play in kindergarten programs than kindergarten teachers did. Yet, Greenberg (1995), in writing about what administrators can do to promote quality early childhood programs in their schools, stresses the importance of principals educating teachers and parents about the importance of free play, as well as supporting through the provision of time and resources teacher efforts to increase the use play in their programs. These are the kinds of administrative attitudes and competencies needed to realize quality early childhood programs in public school settings. Plainly, the principals interviewed in the present study reported here

represent a range in the acquisition of those competencies.

Criteria for distinguishing play from other activity. Play is a feature of children's activity that is at once both very familiar and yet difficult to succinctly characterize (Hughes, 1999). As with many of the other subtle and complex aspects of social behavior, play may be difficult to describe briefly, but "we know it when we see it." But how do we know it? A substantial body of research exists addressing this question, delineating the essential features of playful activity that distinguish it from nonplayful activity (Monighan-Nourot, Scales, & Van Hoorn, 1987; Rubin, Fein, & Vandenberg, 1983; Smith & Vollstedt, 1985). While different researchers may assign varying importance to any one feature, there is substantial agreement that play is characterized by intrinsic motivation (play is an end in itself and is entered into for the sheer pleasure of the activity), active engagement (the player is neither passive nor indifferent to what is occurring, but is psychological involved in it), a focus on means rather than ends (it is the process of playing rather than the products of play that entices the player), nonliteral behavior (a bending or distorting of the real world to fit the needs of the players), and, of course, pleasure (the expression of positive affect at some level) (Hughes, 1999; Van Hoorn et al., 1999; Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1999). Research by Smith & Vollstedt (1985) indicated that not all of these dimensions are equally useful for distinguishing play from non-play activity, and that the context in which the activity occurs influences how it is seen (e.g., an activity that would clearly be seen as play when observed out on the playground might very well be seen as something entirely different when observed inside a crowded classroom).

So, what sort of criteria did the four principals interviewed for the current study use to conceptualize children's activities as playful? In the interviews they were asked, "You observe children who are active and busy. What criteria would you use for judging whether the children themselves would consider the activity to be play?" Brian enthusiastically responded to this

question with:

> *The first thing that comes into my head is that they're having fun, enjoying themselves, eyes are wide open and sparkling, they're smiling, they're talking about it. They're not being prodded to do something. They're engaged in .....actually, they don't even know you're in the room. You walk right behind them and, and they may not even know it. Or they would invite you to come in and play. Those are some criteria that I have when I go through rooms. And, they're excited, they're talking....I could go on and on.*

Alice was a bit less specific at first about criteria, but expressed a confidence in her ability to distinguish play:

> *...play comes normally to a child. I don't know that they would be able to say "I'm playing." I can tell that they're playing by the way in which ... by just the certain things that they're doing .... that's kind of a tough question, because I'm trying to think what I would think of if I were a child. I don't know if I would recognize it as play.....But I can tell you the difference between play and an activity that does not have play in it. There's no creativity, you know, there's no child interaction, um, there's no trying things and then putting it down and trying something else. I can tell that.*

Compare this to what Dennis said. He was specific, but did not elaborate much about his criteria for judging playful activity:

> *I think a lot of it would be, uh, facial expression and body language. I just think they would have more, uh, facial expression, more smiles, more relaxed look, if they felt like they were playing. And I think that their body language would be more random and more into what it is they're doing if they considered it was play*

versus it was something that they had to do. That would be more my criteria.

By contrast, Carl focused on circumstances in which children can misinterpret what adults intend and wind up playing when they should not be doing so:

Oh ... that's a tough one, because sometimes the kids aren't in a play activity, and they think they are. Um, I think probably they know, depending on how much control they feel they have in this activity. If they go in thinking, "I can do this, I can do that, I can..." you know. I mean, where there are very few guidelines and they're just going in, and, say , with a center, and they can kind of structure what they want to do, I think they consider that play.

So, to what degree do their responses reflect the dimensions of playful activity delineated above? Brian clearly centered on the child's pleasure in playing while none of the others did. Both Brian and Dennis also emphasized the level of the child's engagement in the activity, while the others did to a lesser extent. And, Alice, in her references to creativity alluded to the means-not-ends dimension. Only Dennis appeared to refer to the child's intrinsic motivation to play. None of the four addressed the issue of nonliterality, the criterion that Smith & Vollstedt (1985) identified in their research as the most reliable indicator for adults to use to distinguish playful from non-playful activity. Other research has focused on what criteria children themselves use to characterize their activity as play. King (1979) found that kindergarten children considered an activity play if it were freely chosen but saw the same activity as work if it were assigned by a teacher. For older children (King, 1982), the pleasure of an activity was the important factor. The responses about criteria by the principals indicated a minimal recognition of the focal role that choice and pleasure have for children in their perceptions of their own activity. Interestingly, Carl's reference to his impression that "sometimes the kids aren't in a play activity, and they think they are" illustrates how children often deal with the differences

between their own and adult perceptions of their activities --- through "illicit play", that is, play that happens behind the teacher's back (Everhart, 1987; King, 1987).

Theme III: Only If It Fits: Curricular Importance of Child-Initiated Activity.

Adults often dismiss what children do as unimportant if it is seen as "just play." Perhaps as an antidote to this tendency, the literature on developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) frequently refers to "child-initiated activity", rather than to play, as a viable alternative term that conveys the nature of the activity but with fewer negative connotations. How important is such activity? In a review of research on child-initiated activity Schweinhart (1997) says,

> "...programs based on child-initiated activities contribute to children's short- and long-term academic development, while... programs based on teacher-directed lessons obtain a short-term advantage in children's academic development by sacrificing a long-term contribution to their social and emotional development" (p.2).

In their overview of research on DAP, Dunn & Kontos (1997) point out that child-initiation facilitates children's cognitive development, better language outcomes, and is associated with lower levels of stress among children. And, in particular, developmentally appropriate programs that emphasize child-initiated activity are especially associated with better outcomes for children from poor socioeconomic backgrounds (Marcon, 1992; Stipek, Daniels, Galluzzo, & Milburn, 1992; Schweinhart, 1997 & Weikart).

So, given the importance of play and child-initiation in classrooms for young children, how did the four principals interviewed for the present study view child-initiated activity? During the interviews they were asked to describe a situation in which such activity should be encouraged and a situation in which it should be discouraged. It was clear from their responses

that the question made much more sense to some than to others. Carl falteringly responded,

> *I would say, you know, um, kindergarten/first grade, uh, math, where they're taking a look at, at measurements, you know, they, and I always think in terms of like the sand table, the water table, um, bean table, um, excellent situations of, you know, using proper questioning by the teachers of where a child can get an idea of measurements, you know, and volume and so on.*
> *... So,discourage? – I guess, would be if a teacher goes in with probably a more, how do I want to say it, um, focused objective, where they really want the child that day to get a specific, um, learning from that activity.*

Brian's response focused on children initiating things that are outside the scope of the teacher's intentions and therefore less desirable. He said,

> *When do I think it's O.K. to have a child initiate activity? Let's say they're doing a guided reading activity or a read-aloud, and there's an activity that's a spin-off of that, and a child is taking that to a different level cognitively, then I think that's appropriate. But I think if he's off on a tangent somewhere visiting Mars, an activity that has nothing to do with, with what we were talking about, then, uh, that child-initiated activity would probably not be appropriate. As long as it's doing what, uh, I guess use the term objective here, what we are trying to pursue, then that's fine. In fact, I would probably encourage a child to extend it even further, and I myself would probably ask some questions headed in another direction in terms of encouragement to go that way. I would hopefully think they would, they would take it to different levels, to eventually see how it's all tied in, it makes sense.*
> *... Oh, I see this happen quite a bit with, where kids will, uh, older kids too, will try to take you off task, and, uh, I've seen a lot teachers that are very good at discouraging that birdwalking, if you will, but they also make an invitation to the student saying, "Thank you for bringing that up. You know, let's put that aside for now and come back to that later during, uh, group time at the end of the day." In other words, they don't, they don't turn the child off to, uh, to maybe a neat thought or a, a neat show-and-tell item that the child thought was important. I think we have to acknowledge that and, uh, uh, let the child feel good about the fact that they do have some input, but do it in a dignified way.*

When Alice addressed the issue of child-initiated activity, she focused very much on the acceptability of that activity in the classroom context:

> *If it's going to hurt somebody, it's not o.k. If it's a choice that has been offered by the teacher, it is o.k. If it's a choice from a [planning] board that you maybe make a choice it's o.k. As long as no one is harmed, it's o.k. That's play. You*

can run as much as you want on the playground, but you don't run and shove. If it hurts me, I shouldn't do it to others.
... There possibly could be a time that it is not o.k. not to do what I ask you to do. Maybe you don't have a choosing activity, maybe this particular time, you are in a language circle, and you will wait your turn, um, you know, I mean, there are activities, certainly, activities that I may ask you to sit down and write your name. I may ask you, you know, you choose not, it is not o.k. that you choose not to do that. You need to make sure that children understand that there will be activities that will have choices, and there will be some activities they won't have choices. Such is life.

All of the above responses concerning child-initiated activity relate to the meaning of the activity from the teacher's perspective, with how it meets teacher needs and intentions. Yet, fundamental to play is the notion that it is engaged in for children's intrinsic reasons and not for those of the adult. Dennis was the only one of the four interviewees to approach this aspect of the activity. He said,

The situation in which it should be encouraged... I think, if I saw that there was a general void of child-initiated play on a regular basis. In other words, it looked like from the plans and the observations that it wasn't really ever, uh, ever included in the child's day, I would really encourage the teacher to, to allow that to happen, for all the reasons we talked about, because of the fact that it, that it just, it encourages a more positive environment, and kids feel more in control, and a teacher can really learn a lot about kids by observing and not just sitting back in the corner, but observing kids and how they choose to play and the socialization that goes on with that. So I would encourage it if I saw what I would consider a lack of it.

However, even he expressed a distrust of play for play's sake, for reasons the child has determined. Rather,he endorsed play as legitimate only when it fit into a larger picture of teacher accountability:

...I would discourage it, other than for safety reasons, probably on the other end of the scale, if I saw that it just seemed to be taking up a more than an appropriate amount of time, that it had almost no structure, and it was almost like it was like free play a good share of the time without some more direction, or that the play itself wasn't being observed, and there was no follow-up with it. In other words, it was for no meaningful purpose. Kids were just putting blocks together or playing in the, in the creative corner and doing little plays, but there was no follow-up or no accountability piece with it, that the teacher really did anything.....

So, it is clear from their comments that, in the classroom, they valued children's self-initiated activity, their play, only to the degree to which it matched the teacher's intentions and curricular goals. This is not unusual, since the notion of play as a learning medium is not common throughout primary education (Bergen, 1988). It often get relegated to serving only as a way to expend excess energy, provide a break from the "real" work of the classroom, or serving as a reward for doing other more valued tasks (Van Hoorn et al., 1999). Accountability and assessment pressures often compel teachers to eliminate anything that does not directly and overtly contribute to the curricular objectives (Grant, 1993). Van Hoorn et al. (1999) make a distinction between curriculum-generated play and play-generated curriculum. The former is more familiar and more comfortable to school personnel, and it is basically this aspect of play in the curriculum that each of the principals spoke to in their comments about encouraging or discouraging child-initiated activity. Curriculum-generated play enables children to learn predictable concepts and skills in predetermined curriculum areas. Through teacher organization of learning experiences, children have an opportunity to both acquire initial skills and to practice or consolidate those already acquired (Johnson et al., 1999). Often thematically based, such activities even can be what Bergen (1988) has labeled as "work disguised as play". By contrast, play-generated curriculum occurs during spontaneous play and the most unstructured child activity. It represents curriculum that emerges directly from the interests of the children (Van Hoorn et al., 1999) and therefore may relate to broad curricular goals, but only coincidentally to specific curricular objectives. Overall, for the four principals in the present study, curriculum-generated play is acceptable, in varying degrees, but they are much more cautious about play-generated curriculum. Dennis put it succinctly:

> *I don't think they [teachers on my staff] would perceive me as someone who would think play without some type of structure would be legitimate; in other*

words ... it's like having an objective for a lesson, you know. If we're going to take 20 minutes of kids' time, there needs to be a pre-thought reason why we're doing what we're doing; and if they can validate what they're doing and why they're doing it, then I'm all in favor of that.

But, play for its own sake, for the child's reasons, for its own legitimacy? Apparently not.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

These principals each had long been part of a school district that placed explicit and extensive emphasis on the importance of early childhood education and on developmentally appropriate programs for young children. Yet, none of them had much in their backgrounds that could be seen as sufficient preparation for the roles they were asked to fill in regard to the ECE programs in their buildings. While they all knew that play for young children was supposed to be important, their knowledge about the specifics of play, its role in children's development, and its curricular implications for early learning was scant. Though each principal possessed isolated bits and pieces of information about play, none had a coherent nor broad understanding of the role of play as a learning medium in programs for young children. This was evident in their remarks about how they would deal with others, especially parents, about issues concerning play. Overall, their strategies for addressing parent questions about play amounted to falling back on generic problem-solving techniques, or to merely stressing district policy, but containing little specific information that directly addressed issues of play:

Carl: I would say, that the general philosophy of our program is to get kids involved.
Brian: I am taking the stand ... that is the way we do it.

Their general lack of knowledge of about play was further reflected in their comments about criteria for distinguishing play from non-play activities. While among the four principals there was a collective recognition of the importance of various dimensions of play, no one

individual possessed more than one or two of these dimensions in his or her repertory of concepts pertaining to children's play behaviors. Similarly, their understanding of the curricular role of play in early education programs was equally fragmented. They understood and, to varying degrees, were willing to accept curriculum-based play. But play-based curriculum, or emergent curriculum based in children's interests, was far less acceptable or trusted.

So, what is the meaning of all of this? As previously mentioned, both the primary professional organizations for early childhood educators (NAEYC) and elementary principals (NAESP) have issued position papers and guidelines that endorse the fundamental role of children's self-initiated play in appropriate educational practice at the k-2 level. The participants in this study were administrators in a district that has strongly endorsed the importance of ECE and play in the k-2 curriculum. Yet they clearly showed, on the one hand, a general lack of a sound knowledge base about play as a learning medium for young children, and on the other, a high level of confidence in their ability to adequately and effectively deal with both parent concerns and curricular issues concerning play. Such discontinuity indicates the pitfalls of a stress on the managerial over the leadership and advocacy functions of the building level administrator. These principals could adequately handle the day-to-day running of the various early childhood programs in their buildings, but they were ill-equipped to act as strong instructional leaders in the improvement of these primary and preprimary programs. Further, they were ill-prepared to provide the effective advocacy that early childhood programs so often require. In the NAESP (1990) position paper on what appropriate programs for young children should be like this point is addressed explicitly:

> "The principal has the responsibility for taking the lead in articulating the philosophy of the early childhood program and the rationale behind it." (p.13).

This sentiment is echoed by Greenberg (1995), with a twist:

> "Most people would probably agree that it is the principals who largely determine priorities, set standards, and create atmosphere in our elementary schools. Therefore, the first and most significant step in achieving a high-quality early childhood program is for the principal to provide active leadership and support. But, while some principals passionately believe in providing each child with a strong start on the road to maturity and academic success, others merely go along with an early childhood program because it's politically correct in today's educational climate." (p. 11).

Inconsistent and contradictory administrator beliefs and understanding of the knowledge base of early childhood education may lead to inconsistent and contradictory administrator practice. Such a circumstance makes it much more difficult to facilitate the development of quality educational programs for young children in the public school setting. Generally competent administrators, but who lack the necessary knowledge and preparation to be effective advocates for developmentally appropriate programs for young children, simply may not be sufficient. The current qualitative study points out several areas where the incompatibility of administrator beliefs and practice may be of concern, and highlights the need for additional detailed work in this area.

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